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IX.—THE ENGLISH BALLAD OF JUDAS ISCARIOT

Unusual interest attaches to the ballad of Judas, not only because the manuscript in which it is found antedates by two centuries the manuscript of any other English popular ballad, but also because the story it tells is very nearly unique. The manuscript, Trinity College, Cambridge, B. 14. 39, was written in the 13th century; just where is uncertain.¹ The ballad has been frequently printed,² but not correctly until 1904, in the Cambridge Edition of the Ballads.³ It was Professor Child who first recognized the

¹ The manuscript has had something of a history; cf. M. R. James, *The Western Manuscripts in . . . Trinity College, Cambridge*, I, pp. 438 ff. (no. 323, § 17). Professor Skeat believed that the scribe was a Norman. Dr. James suggests that "the occurrence of verses on Robert Grosseteste may be construed as bearing on the provenance of the ms."

² Wright and Halliwell, *Reliquiae Antiquae*, 1841, I, p. 144; Mätzner, *Altenglische Sprachproben*, 1867, I, p. 114; Child, *English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, 1882, I, p. 242 (no. 23) and V, p. 288. The Cambridge Edition of the Ballads says the Judas ballad was first printed in 1845, but the first edition of the *Reliquiae Antiquae* was in 1841.

³ The manuscript has .ii. at the end of lines 8, 25, and 30. Wright omitted this sign, and did not divide the poem into stanzas. Professor Child had seen only Wright's printed copy. In the Cambridge Edition Professor Kittredge, who had a transcript of the ballad made by Skeat after the manuscript was rediscovered in 1896, recognized the strophic device (indicated in the manuscript by .ii.) of repeating the last line of a stanza as the first line of the following stanza (as in st. 5, 14, 17); but it is very curious that Professor Child apparently recognized this device in stanza 14, and overlooked it in the other two cases.—The language of the ballad is Southern. Following Mätzner, Child emended Wright's *s* in *meist*, *heiste*, etc. (lines 6, 19, 21, 22, 28, 31, 33, 34, of the Cambridge Edition) to *h*. In the Cambridge Edition the *s*, which is the manuscript reading, is restored. I think it is likely that the scribe miswrote *s* for *ȝ*; at any rate, the phenomenon is exceedingly odd.

Judas poem as a ballad; but no one has questioned his judgment.

Ballads are, of course, of indefinite age. The ballad of Judas, though we have it in writing so much earlier than that of any other, is not thereby necessarily older. The language, moreover, shows no sign of being earlier than the manuscript. But although there is no direct evidence for believing the ballad to be older than the thirteenth century, there is, on the other hand, nothing to indicate that the story may not be much older. Indeed, *a priori* considerations point to its being very much older. And in view of the fact that analogous—though not exactly parallel—material turns up in Germany and in Africa, we may tentatively suggest a possible relationship, and therefore, by implication, but not necessarily, a very early date.

On Maundy Thursday (says the ballad) Judas sets out, at our Lord's bidding, to Jerusalem to buy food, with thirty 'plates' of silver on his back; in the broad street he may meet some of his townsmen. He meets his sister, the deceitful woman, who ridicules him for believing in the 'false prophet' and then induces him to go to sleep with his head in her lap—and when he awakes the silver has been stolen. In utter despair he finds a rich Jew named Pilate, and makes a bargain with him to sell his Master for precisely the thirty pieces of silver that have been taken from him. Then Jesus sits down with his apostles to eat, and announces that he has been sold; and at the very moment when Peter and Judas are denying implication in the crime, Pilate arrives with ten hundred knights.

Professor Child mentions the tragic, Œdipodean tale which the Middle Ages told as the life of Judas,⁴ and he

⁴ Cf. *Legenda Aurea*, ed. Graesse, ch. XLV. This legend is at least as old as the 12th century, and enjoyed an immense popularity throughout Europe. I have been investigating its history for some time, and hope to publish before very long the results of my study.

summarizes the usual story of the thirty coins;⁵ but, as he indicates, neither of these has any connexion with the ballad. Very important, however, is the Wendish folk-song to which Professor Child drew attention.⁶ Here the story is that the Highest God, wandering through the wide world, came to the house of a poor widow, and sought shelter. The widow complained that she had no bread in the house, but He offered to buy some for thirty pieces of silver, and asked who would fetch it. Judas volunteered, and went out into the street of the Jews. There some of his countrymen, who were gambling under a tub, invited him to join them. Judas replied, "Whether I play or not, I shall lose everything." The first two stakes he won; at the third play he lost all. Then the Jews asked him why he was so sad, and advised him to sell his Master for thirty pieces of silver.—Jesus asks who has sold him. John, Peter, and Judas say, "Is it I?" and to Judas the Master replies, "False Judas, thou knowest best."—Judas was seized with remorse and ran to hang himself. God cried after him, "Turn back, thy sin is forgiven."⁷ But Judas ran on, came to a fir tree and said, "Soft wood, wilt hold me?" He ran on, came to an aspen, and said, "Hard wood, wilt hold me?" He hanged himself on the aspen, which still trembles in fear of the judgment day.

"According to the ballads,⁸ then," says Professor Child,

⁵ Godfrey of Viterbo, *Pantheon*, Part. xx; etc. And cf. Budge, *Book of the Bee*, p. 95; and R. Duval, *Littérature Syriacque*, p. 116.

⁶ Leopold Haupt und J. E. Schmalzer, *Volkssagen der Wenden*, I, pp. 276-8 (no. CCLXXXIV), Grimma, 1841. The term 'Wends' is here used in the narrow sense, meaning the inhabitants of Lusatia (Ober- und Nieder-Lausitz).

⁷ Cf. Pitre, *Fiabe, novelle e racconti*, Palermo, 1875, I, p. cxxxviii, where after the betrayal Jesus says to Judas: 'Repent, Judas, for I pardon you'; but he went away and hanged himself on a tamarind tree.

⁸ That is, the English and the Wendish.

"Judas lost the thirty pieces at play, or was robbed of them, with collusion of his sister. But his passionate behavior in the English ballad, st. 9, goes beyond all apparent occasion. Surely it was not for his tithe of the thirty pieces."⁹ This last stricture is justified, although such extravagant madness is conventional in mediæval literature. Perhaps the author of the ballad was 'thinking ahead' and had in mind Judas's remorse for the betrayal of Jesus; or possibly by some accident of transmission the ninth stanza has been transposed from a later part of the ballad, now lost, where his final remorse was described.

The points of similarity between the two ballads are numerous, and for the most part obvious. In both Judas goes out with thirty pieces of silver, at Christ's bidding, to buy food for the apostles. In both he meets with fellow-townsmen in the city. In both he is tricked out of his money, in the one case by theft, in the other by gambling. In both his grief and despair are emphasized. In both, of course, he sells Jesus for thirty pieces of silver; but in the English ballad it is to Pilate, and he receives the very money he has lost, while there is no indication that the plan of selling his Master was suggested to him by the Jews. In both there is the same quick transition to the scene in which Jesus makes known to the apostles that he has been sold. Peter and Judas, of course, deny all guilt (the Wendish ballad adds John)—and here the ballads diverge. In the Wendish, Judas is branded as the false one; he suffers remorse and hangs himself, first on a fir then on an aspen. In the English, Pilate arrives with his

⁹ St. 9 reads:

He drou hym selue bi þe cop, þat al it lauede ablode;
þe Iewes out of Iurselem awenden he were wode.

This is just after he has become aware of his loss.

knights (a variant of the scene on the Mount of Olives); and the ballad breaks off. The complete version may perfectly well have gone on with an account of Judas's remorse and hanging.

That the two ballads should agree in the main story is to be expected, because they both follow Biblical tradition; but that, while differing in some respects, they should agree in several non-Biblical details of incident and in structure is truly remarkable. There is nothing, to be sure, in this parallelism that cannot be accounted for by coincidence; but it seems to me more reasonable to assume some sort of indirect or distant relationship. Of just what sort, it is idle to speculate without more data.

With these two ballads I should like to compare an interesting fragment from the Coptic *Gospels of the Twelve Apostles*,¹⁰ which Origen considered to be, along with the *Gospel according to the Egyptians*, the very oldest apocrypha, possibly even anterior to Luke.¹¹ Here it is the wife of Judas who is at the bottom of all his villainy. Every day Judas stole something from the bag and brought it to his wife.¹² But she was a woman of insatiable avarice, and when he did not bring home enough to please her she would hold him up to ridicule. One day, because of her greed, she said to him: "Lo, the Jews seek thy Master.

¹⁰ *Patrologia Orientalis*, II, 2, *Les Apocryphes Coptes, I, Les Évangiles des Douze Apôtres*. Edited and translated by E. Revillout. Paris, 1904. This fragment is the 5th, pp. 156-7.

¹¹ M. S. L. 13, 1802. Other Fathers regarded it as not so early.

¹² Compare the Provençal *Passion*, still in manuscript, in which an early version of the usual legend of parricide and incest is found, at the end of which Jesus promises to Judas's wife and two children a tithe of the company's receipts for their support. MS. Bibliothèque Nationale (Paris), nouv. acq. fr. 4232, fol. 32v. It must be remembered, however, that this wife in the Coptic Gospel can have no connexion with the mother-wife of Judas in the mediæval *vitæ Judæe*.

Deliver him to them, and they will give thee great riches in return." Judas listened to his wife, just as Adam did to Eve, and under the power of her evil eye went to the Jews and bargained to sell his Master for thirty pieces of silver. When he had received the money he took it to his wife and said—. The remainder is lost.

The parallelism between this legend and the English ballad is not particularly close, but the two stories have this in common, that they both tend to shift the burden of guilt from Judas himself to a woman, his sister or wife. This tendency to shelter Judas or to palliate his crime is essentially Oriental; and although the Coptic fragment and the English ballad may independently represent a sort of attempt at motivation of the sudden incomprehensible betrayal, I am inclined to suppose some kind of relationship, devious and distant enough, between the two.

Although we have no means of following the early history of this ballad material, we may naturally turn to the Gospels as the ultimate source of part of it. The very ease with which the incidents of both the English and Wendish ballads could have sprung from a popular distortion of the Biblical history is a strong argument against the theory of any closer relationship of the ballads than that of having the same ultimate origin,—that is to say, of any relationship at all. And yet I think one must overstress the element of coincidence if one would deny the *probability* of some connexion.

For the journey to buy bread the obvious source is John 4, 8. When Jesus met the woman of Samaria at Jacob's well "his disciples were gone away into the city to buy meat"—*ἵνα τροφὰς ἀγοράσωσι*. Since Judas was treasurer and steward, it was natural to choose him for the errand. Moreover, in the Huldreich text of the *Toldoth*

Jeschu,¹³ when Jesus and his companions are on the way to Jerusalem, Judas offers to go to the city to buy bread.¹⁴ The difficulty of the disciples in obtaining food is perhaps reflected in the story of the miraculous feeding of the five thousand, which both Matthew and Mark tell twice,¹⁵ and may have made a vivid appeal to the popular mind.¹⁶

¹³ *Historia Jeschuae Nazareni*, Leyden, 1705, p. 53.

¹⁴ Here it is an imaginary city, Laisch (Latium?). Cf. Samuel Krauss, *Das Leben Jesu nach jüdischen Quellen*, Berlin, 1902, p. 163 n. For a somewhat analogous incident in the Koran cf. Krauss, p. 199.

¹⁵ Mt. 14, 15 ff.; 15, 32 ff. Mk. 6, 35 ff.; 8, 1 ff.

¹⁶ A travesty of the miraculous feeding of the five thousand is found in the Huldreich version, p. 51. On the journey from Rome to Jerusalem (the same on which Judas later went to Laisch to buy food) Jesus, Peter, and Judas stopped at a small inn, and mine host had only one goose to offer his three guests. Jesus then took the goose and said, "This is verily not sufficient for three persons; let us go to sleep, and the whole goose shall be his who shall have the best dream." Whereupon they lay down to slumber. In the middle of the night Judas rose up and ate the goose. When morning came the three met, and Peter said, "I dreamed I sat at the foot of the throne of Almighty God." And to him Jesus answered, "I am the son of Almighty God, and I dreamed that thou wert seated near me; my dream is therefore superior to thine, and the goose shall be mine to eat." Then Judas said, "And I, while I was dreaming, ate the goose." And Jesus sought the goose, but vainly, for Judas had devoured it.—Similar tales are reported by Vansleb, who travelled in Egypt in the seventeenth century. Cf. Gustave Brunet, *Les Évangiles Apocryphes*, 2nd edition, Paris, 1863. The tale of a person outwitting his two companions in this way is, of course, very widespread. It is doubtless of Oriental origin, and got into the literature of the West probably through the *Disciplina Clericalis*. Cf. *Contes Moralises de Nicole Bozon*, ed. by L. T. Smith and P. Meyer, Soc. des anc. textes franc., Paris, 1889, p. 293. It is one of the exempla of Jacques de Vitry. Bozon tells it to illustrate the proverb: 'Qui tot coveite tot perde.' M. Meyer believes that the *Gesta Romanorum* (Oesterley, ch. 106) drew from Bozon rather than from Petrus Alphonsi. The *Alphabet of Tales*, however, gives Petrus as its source for the story (ccxxxviii, ed. by H. H. Banks, E. E. T. S., p. 166). Goedeke, *Orient und Occident*, III (1864), p. 191, gives several other references, to Eastern and Western versions, and shows its occurrence in Æsopic

There is nothing in the Gospels to suggest the sister of Judas in the English ballad; but in the early Coptic text there is his wife with the evil eye and the inordinate love of money. Here is apparent, as I have suggested, a desire to shield Judas from the ignominy of having sold his Master by making him only an agent; and the choice of a woman to bear the responsibility of the crime is certainly of a piece with the usual Oriental attitude toward women. The general abuse of women which runs through so much of Western novelistic literature is practically all of Eastern importation. It is not at home in the West; it is not a popular motif there; and we feel therefore the more justified, when we find an isolated instance of it, as in the Judas ballad, in assuming an Oriental origin,—especially when we can find an Oriental analogy. Note, moreover, that in the ballad Judas's sister is not *an* evil woman, but *the* evil woman (*pe swikele wimon*), as though she were a person with a well-known history; and that the Coptic Gospel emphasizes by repetition the woman's bad character: 'la malice de ses yeux et son insatiabilité . . . par suite de l'insatiabilité et du mauvais œil de cette femme.'

The rôle of Pilate in the English ballad can be nothing but a popular corruption or misunderstanding of the Biblical story mediævalized. Since he had a large share in the destruction of Jesus, he might naturally have been the one to pay Judas; and as an important personage he would of course be a knight. Judas's apparent anxiety to get back the identical thirty 'plates' which were stolen from him is an exaggeration intended doubtless to emphasize

literature. (I am indebted to Professor Kittredge for references to Goedeke, Bozon, and the *Alphabet of Tales*.) Judas's connexion with this tale seems to be entirely limited to the East. In the *Toldoth*, of course, it is part of his rôle always to get the better of Jesus.

his remorse. How Pilate should be in possession of just those coins is a point (unless it implies that he was an accomplice of the theft) on which the narrator would simply say: so it was.

The other incidents of the ballad—so far as it goes—are in essential agreement with the Gospel narrative. The story of Judas's hanging on the fir and aspen in the Wendish ballad has various folk-lore ramifications which need not be discussed now. But one would certainly like to know the close of the English ballad.

Beyond all doubt it is a far cry from first-century Egypt to thirteenth-century England to nineteenth-century Lusatia. One might almost speak of the inherent improbability of tracing any relationship among tales or parts of tales so isolated and widely separated; and, to be sure, I do not pretend to have traced, in any strict sense, such a relationship. But the more one studies the mysteries of comparative folk-lore, the more one comes to look upon almost anything as possible, and to identify probability with possibility. At any rate, a dim light is better than none at all.

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